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## Between Africa and India: thinking comparatively across the western Indian Ocean

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### Abstract

Scholarship on the Indian Ocean is generally comparative in its approach. In this paper, we draw from our research experiences on the Swahili and Gujarati coasts in order to discuss some of the epistemological consequences of comparison for the ways in which East Africa and Western India have been understood. We critically examine the frames and terms of comparison in the work of the historian Thomas Metcalf and the anthropologists A.H.J. Prins, Helene Basu and David F. Pocock. We suggest that the personal journeys of scholars, as well as the sources they use, have profoundly influenced the ways in which they have been able to write and problematize their own material.

### Introduction

This paper critically compares and contrasts some of the ways the Indian Ocean has been framed in academic writing.<sup>1</sup> The Indian Ocean is a maritime zone, meaning that human life in the port towns and littorals is largely sea-oriented, conditioned by being positioned adjacent to a watery mass. This includes bridging and filtering functions in relation to the social worlds from beyond the sea. The Swahili coast, for example, received its name from the Arabic »*sawahil*« (sing. *sahil*) denoting

»coasts« but also »borders« and »rims« more generally. This ambiguity corresponds to processes of inclusion and exclusion, integration and separation, as two kinds of responses to social connections. Indeed, port towns are connecting platforms for related but different social worlds across the sea. The ways then in which the similarities and differences between related social phenomena, material culture and experience are perceived and conceptualized by people in their respective life worlds on both ends of these connections is something that we discuss in more detail below under the banner of the term »equivalence«.<sup>2</sup>

Equivalence, as a way of seeing the familiar in the strange, or the same in the other, presents a number of ethnographic and methodological challenges to Indian Ocean studies and comparative research more generally (not least, as we shall see, because the processes described apply to researchers as well as to the subjects of research). At the same time, considering seriously the production of phenomena and perceptions of equivalence provides a useful conceptual approach to address these challenges. Equivalence occurs at various levels of sensual experience and rationalization. Impressions of unity and diversity, and of sameness and difference, across the ocean have to be contextualized and interrogated at ethnographic and historiographic levels with their specific materials and narratives as well as at the level of wider anthropological and historical exposition. Cognitive and imaginative worlds, we suggest, exist in dialogue with the travels and travails of humans through the material world: as the sailor makes a voyage, the voyage, so to speak, makes the sailor.

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: Previous versions of this text were presented at the conference 'Connecting Histories across the Indian Ocean: Religion, Politics and Popular Culture' in Goa, in November 2009, and at the workshop 'Trading cultures across the Indian Ocean' at ZMO in Berlin, in July 2011. We thank the participants and especially the organisers of both events (Preben Kaarsholm, Isabel Hofmeyr, Pamila Gupta, and Rochelle Pinto; Sebastian Prange and Prem Poddar) for stimulating comments and discussions.

<sup>2</sup> This is an idea we have taken from the work of the historian K.N. Chaudhuri (including, 1995, 2006).

The structures of individual movement and personal knowledge are necessarily intertwined.

While the Indian Ocean is a maritime zone, all too often theorization of it looks from far above, the theorist seeing – god-like, but far from omniscient – over the waters and lands of the region. Without dismissing the value of high theory, we wish instead to look at the region at the human level – ethnographically – a level at which the senses, affections and other kinds of concrete transactions shape people's worlds in terms of meaning and structure. This exercise is an initial contribution to what we hope will be a longer project on the mechanisms of comparison and *heurism* across the western Indian Ocean, based on our respective research experiences (e.g. Simpson 2006; Kresse 2007) and building on previous joint reflections (Simpson and Kresse 2007). This paper, in a sense, is an ethnographic study – not of our established field sites (in Kenya and India, the Swahili and Gujarat coasts respectively) – but rather of the work of four scholars of the Indian Ocean who have worked in different ways on the axis between East Africa and India. Their materials allow us to reflect on the role of the researcher in generating knowledge and frames of reason. Researchers too, we suggest, become Indian Ocean travellers of sorts, because how they conduct their research often implicitly determines what and how they can see, and thus what they ultimately can (and cannot) observe.

Therefore, our focus is less on the formal theoretical devices that have been used to impose order on an unruly space than on the ways the movement and experience of researchers themselves, as well as those of the subjects of their research (who are often also their ›informants‹), have implicitly given shape and form to academic writing. Our primary focus is not on those commonly known for their forthright statements about the Indian Ocean, but on those whose work has compelled them to address, in other ways, questions of authenticity, scale and power in the region. We regard this as a call for a proper treatment of research as an epistemological practice in the multiple sites of the Indian Ocean. In this, the paper is a practical contribution to the literature on methodology.

Our first traveller is Adriaan Hendrik Johan Prins (1921-2000), a Dutch anthropologist who conducted fieldwork on the Kenyan port town of Lamu and the wider Swahili coast from the late 1950s onward, with a special focus on seafaring. His writing drew strongly on Robert Redfield's differentiation between great and little traditions, then very much in fashion in the South Asian scholarship of the period. Second in line is the American historian of the British Raj, Thomas Metcalf. He has written on the imperial connections of Britain in the Indian Ocean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our third is Helene Basu,

a German social anthropologist who has worked in Gujarat since the 1980s with low-status Sunni Muslims or Siddis, who are popularly thought of as ›African‹. She has more recently turned to research in Zanzibar to explore the traces of culture that have passed between the two coasts. The final author we consider is David Pocock (1928-2007), a British social anthropologist who conducted research in East Africa and later in Gujarat with caste Hindus in the 1950s.

The contrasting work of these four scholars highlights some of the successes as well as the pitfalls and problems of thinking comparatively from shore to shore. Also, we have decided to pick telling examples close to our own respective regions of expertise, so that our discussion, while focussing on general implications, may shed light on one particular if broadly conceived sample of a trans-oceanic axis that is constituted by social movement but also, as shown in our particular case here, by research and scholarship observing and following such movement.

We should also not forget to point out a related axis of comparative relevance to the cases we are discussing here, namely the trans-oceanic community constituted by Hadrami networks in the Indian Ocean, running between the Hadramaut and East Africa (in a south-western direction) and the Hadramaut and South East Asia (in the eastern direction). Historians have researched these in depth (for instance, Anne Bang 2003; Ulrike Freitag 2003; Freitag and Clarence-Smith 1997; Abu-shoek and Ibrahim 2009) and recently also the anthropologist Engseng Ho (2006). Social integration and engagement of Hadrami diasporas within the host communities elsewhere, through Alawiyya Sufi rituals and Islamic education, through trade and through intermarriage with local women, were an important characteristic of these networks. Yet it seems all this happened with a view to a commonly assumed prerogative of the ›homeland‹ in the Hadramaut, to which social links are sustained and a return expected, even if only temporary (e.g. as pilgrims). In his interpretation of this relationship, Ho emphasizes that the Hadrami Alawiyya model rhetorically insists on a hierarchical relation between Tarim in the Hadramaut as ›ancestral source‹ and any other region to which connections have been established. This contrasts with our conceptual interest here in circling around the idea of ›equivalence‹ between connected littorals across the ocean. In the Hadrami case, according to Ho, things that return or are given in exchange from somewhere else ›are not equivalents‹ but inferior (2006: 93), and ›reciprocity is not possible‹ (2006: 94). This argument applies to incoming people, too, who are qualified either as ›descendants‹ and ›inferiors‹ (insiders to the networks) or as ›aliens or guests‹ (2006: 94). Ho's work represents an alternative model of

trans-oceanic connectivity to one ordered around »equivalence« that we are trying to explore here. We are looking at social groups like the Siddis (following Basu) or Hindu castes (looked at on both coasts, following Pocock), or the Bhadalas, a group of seafarers originally from today's Gujarat who can be found in contemporary Mombasa and other East African parts.

### The theoretical ocean

Fernand Braudel (1972) is commonly attributed with having introduced the idea that the unity of a cultural and geographical area can also be defined by the movements of people across the water at its centre rather than by the lands around its periphery. In his writing, the sea is a place of human activity defined by journeys and exchanges and specifically the cultures of the merchants, sailors, traders, pilgrims, migrants and other travellers crossing it. K.N. Chaudhuri (1999) later adopted this approach to suggest that the Indian Ocean region included land networks; the sea unites people and places through recognizable systems of exchange, but distance and cultural differences continue to create significant divide. According to him, diverse aspects and features like travel, movements of population, climate, periods of colonisation, proficiency in sea travel and religion (especially Islam) give unity in the Indian Ocean. Diversity, in contrast, becomes apparent in social systems and cultural traditions such as food, clothing, housing and religion (for instance, Islam). Indeed, the case of Islam illustrates the dynamic tensions between social unity and diversity, for instance, when the expansion of the religious sphere reorders patterns of regional political affiliation, or when competing factions promulgate different interpretations of it in public, thus emphasizing social tensions among Muslims. Nile Green (2011) has aptly captured this in his recent work on the »religious economy« of the western Indian Ocean. Green employs the paradigm of a marketplace to represent the internal and yet far-reaching trans-oceanic dynamics around the negotiation and transformation of competing forms of Islam »on offer« to the faithful in and through the colonial cosmopolis of Bombay. In Chaudhuri's view, in any case, the diversity evident in the whole is itself evidence of a unity of sorts. This is because the diversities are of particular kinds and therefore the whole should be thought of as being a particular type as well.

Chaudhuri emphasized trade as the unifying mechanism of the region, perhaps to the neglect of other social aspects of life. Echoing the world systems approach of Wallerstein, the conclusion that diversity is evidence of unity is ultimately not very helpful, for taking this idea to its logical conclusion would be to suggest that everything is connected to everything else in much the same way.

While this may be unfalsifiable in the abstract, it is not a tenable theoretical position for a social scientist investigating particular phenomena or a particular region. For a variety of pragmatic reasons, researchers have to draw rhetorical or heuristic boundaries around their material and organize their personal time. However, despite criticism of the ways such historical narratives glossed over the details of regional trade and polity (see for example Arasaratnam 1990), the paradigm of unity and diversity has remained popular for looking onto the waters of the Ocean.

Scholars specializing in regional studies are often faced with the same problems as the macro-historians we have briefly discussed: where does maritime society stop and land society start? And, as it is nearly always concluded that land and sea form distinct types of sociality (see for example Braudel 1972: 187), what is the relationship between the two forms? »Maritime culture«, an idea elaborated by A.H.J. Prins (1965) in the monograph *Sailing from Lamu* – on which we comment further below and which has also been a source for conceptual reflection by others (Reinwald 2002: 13-14) – refers to a particular set of relationships given by trade, shipping and fishing between people and the sea that distinguish them from landlubbers. In his analysis, Lamu becomes a »little world« formed by maritime rhythms and the movement of its people on ships. He asserted that such culture is »open« rather than »closed« and is continuously influenced by the voyages and interactions of its members (1965: 57). Drawing from Redfield's notions of »great« and »little« traditions, Prins went further to argue that Lamu »represents the local »little civilization« corresponding with the »great civilization« of Arabia and Persia« (ibid.). He also saw Lamu as a »little« culture in relation to East Africa's »great« trading settlements of Mombasa and Zanzibar, both of which were much more affected by Western culture than Lamu itself was. In terms of analysis, Lamu is thus given a double cultural focus reflecting two »great civilizations« (Islamic and Western) that are, as he says, »mirrored in one glass« (ibid.); it is in relation to these that Lamu's own features are measured, its little maritime world being connected and influenced at different levels and several sides.

Many historians have found it productive to consider the Indian Ocean a unified space with a history distinguishable from that of other spaces. Kenneth McPherson (1993) defined the Indian Ocean as a »world« that was identifiable by its distinct patterns of trade; however, through the analysis of »cultural diffusion and interaction« (1993: 3), he was able to conclude that the Indian Ocean was not a homogenous cultural area in any straightforward sense. He regarded any commonality between regions as determined by trade and the exchanges (material or otherwise) that it entailed. Michael

Pearson (1985) has also suggested that the Ocean is not a region shaped or unified by a diffuse understanding of commonality or structure. This is because littoral people often tend to follow multiple frameworks of identification, cultivating a strong sense of belonging both to their countries and to wider patterns of social membership, such the Muslim world. Several frames of social belonging and cohesion apply to littoral people at the same time – more so than to landlocked people, the argument goes. Pearson also says it is hard to overestimate the importance of cultural brokers, who mediate meaning between different littoral communities within historical processes of communication and mutual understanding (Pearson 2010).

With emphasis on a process-oriented historical approach, the concept of »seascape« has been introduced and pushed, as it »accounts for different – converging and conflicting – ways of relating to and representing this historical, social and cultural space«, the Indian Ocean (Reinwald 2002: 18). Here, the idea is to focus on processes and movements of different kinds as well as on a multiplicity of perspectives applicable to the ocean as the kind of flexible space that it is or represents, a »space on the move« (ibid.). This approach draws inspiration from Prins' conception of »maritime culture« (as we described above and will discuss further below), but critically distances itself from any assumption of normative homogeneity and ahistorical character. This goes along with our own discussion of historical and dynamic trans-oceanic social axes of movement and connectivity across Indian Ocean littorals.

### The ethnographic ocean

This is not the first time we have written together; previously, we have struggled to understand the influence of historical processes on our ethnography (Simpson and Kresse 2007). We have now become interested in exploring ethnographically the traces of Gujarat in Mombasa and of the Swahili coast in India, as we will move in future joint research to outline *one* of the many »elsewheres« to be found in both of our field sites. In the longer term, we are interested in identifying similarities and continuities between the two places, in order to understand the transformation of beliefs and practices as they have made journeys along with people across the western Indian Ocean and become part of a wider world of circulation and culture in their acquired contexts.

The notion of »equivalence«, we think, provides one way of thinking through a comparative exercise, especially in relation to the politics of vision and patterns of resemblance. At one level, seeing similarities on strange shores may remind the traveller of home and in the process create new visual, emotional and psychological bonds. The same applies to aural connections and processes of hea-

ring (music, the call to prayer and language use, for instance) – as Andrew Eisenberg (2009) has recently shown in a fascinating study of Mombasa's postcolonial soundscape. Experiences of familiarity and difference, feeling »at home« or »strange« when elsewhere, are created in this way. Equivalence might also be found in patterns of local architecture and the shaping of social spaces in ways that may be seen as typical for a region. Here we are thinking of daily street-side meeting points for men of the neighbourhood, where news, gossip and political opinions are exchanged among peers. Such gatherings exist on both sides of the ocean; they are called *otlas* in Gujarati and *barazas* in Swahili, where topics range from jokes to matters of personal concern and political debate. Equivalence might also occur in religious ritual – as in the variety of terms and forms of Islamic prayer that David Parkin and others (2000) have discussed. Or it might occur in the immediate resonance of seemingly familiar designs and motifs, iconographies and shapes, people's gestures, postures and bodily movements (e.g. when walking in public as an identifiable member of a certain group) and so forth.

Our assumption here is that just as people who are moving between distant ports and littorals may »recognise« or »identify« a particular object or habit from home in the layout or a façade of a faraway town or in the ways people carry themselves, at another level they may also see the shape and features of their home society in the societies of the places they visit – and in the process contribute to the elaboration of that culture. As anthropologists however, we are not simply interested in types of physical and material equivalences, such as whether doors look similar in India and Africa because carpenters of Indian descent manufacture doors in Africa. We are also interested in the less tangible equivalences of social form, such as the structures and relational patterns of religion, caste, ethnicity and language. It is already well known, for instance, that what appears as »Indian« in East Africa may not find a simple equivalence in India, as what appears »Indian« may have emerged in Africa as an Indian response to conditions in Africa. Indeed, there is evidence in the literature (see Pocock 1957a, 1957b for example) showing, quite unsurprisingly in fact, that »Indians« in Africa are sometimes quite different from Indians in India, their transformation being at least in part a direct response to the conservative or authoritarian compulsions of community leaders in India.

At the same time, of course – and this is perhaps sometimes exaggerated – Indians are also part of networks of various kinds that span the ocean, keeping Indians in Africa connected to India and therefore in a constant dialogue with their own senses of cultural difference. Therefore, we wish particularly to scrutinise the idea that networks



tend to homogenise culture or are based on homogenous conceptions of culture. Although we have used concepts of continental, national and regional cultures here as a way of introducing our problem, in terms of ethnography we are primarily interested in these processes at the level of caste, community, religious association, relations among communities and individuals' self-positioning processes within them. In this paper however, we first of all seek to explore the ways other researchers have travelled in and across the western Indian Ocean and how they have made connections between things they have seen in their writing. We now turn to this subject.

### **A.H.J Prins: »maritime culture« - an analytic link?**

As we have indicated above, the Dutch anthropologist A.H.J. Prins provides some stimulating ideas about »maritime culture« that are useful when thinking about an analytic link across the ocean. In his monograph *Sailing from Lamu* (1965), sea-related activities like sailing, shipbuilding, and fishing in a social context centrally characterise people and social life in Lamu town, the main port of Lamu Island in an archipelago of islands just off the Northern Kenyan coast. This is similar to how Simpson (2006) describes the port of Mandvi on the Gujarat coast. In his ethnography of the specific and characteristic sea-related activities, concerns and performances around which social life revolves in the port town of Lamu on the northern Swahili coast, Prins qualifies (and partly quantifies by means of statistics) »maritimity« in relation to the frequency of expression and the level of importance of such activities within a society (Prins 1965: 4). Based on his approach, a specific coastal urban context within a wider network of related ports, and with a range of (established or potential) social contacts and reference points to social »elsewheres« in the (far or near) distance where these activities matter too, characterises a particular »maritime culture«.

In Prins' concluding reflections, this is qualified for Lamu by carving out two series of loosely associated analytic terms that express typical »clusters of properties« that he regards as underpinning »maritimity« in the example of Lamu. According to Prins, these relate to basic characteristics of Lamu social life, prominently among them »discontinuity« (abruptness, intermittency), »swagger« (vivacity, exaggeration or »fundamental joyfulness«), and »ambivalence« (1965: 272-4). Prins also attests a certain lack of clear-cut and valid norms and standards in everyday life and speaks of a »somewhat informal social structure« - particularly in comparison to Arab communities across the ocean. At the base of what he calls a »maritime ethos«, he sees »adaptivity« to dynamic and constantly changing circumstances within a scenario of social am-

bivalence as a kind of *leitmotif* for understanding social behaviour. In concrete terms, he links this to a certain forbearance and tolerance on the part of Lamu people - who are almost exclusively Muslim - about co-citizens, neighbours, and kin. As an illustration, he mentions relatively open marriage rules and the possibility (and social acceptability) of change in group affiliations. Prins also points to openness toward strangers and alludes to a certain sense of urban social egalitarianism when he says that strangers »have always been accepted into society on an equal footing, provided they embraced Islam« (1965: 269). Here, Prins invokes the example of Mombasa's (related) history, in which the so-called »nine tribes«, as part of the core urban groups, are commonly presented as the »original« founding citizens of the town, while they were actually constituted by fugitive groups from the northern Swahili coast looking for shelter and a new home in Mombasa in the 17th century.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to Mombasa links our report on Prins' »maritime culture« to our task of reflecting upon a specific trans-oceanic axis that we seek to engage with further in jointly conducted empirical research. Adaptivity, openness, tolerance and the integration of strangers into the urban community are features that certainly resonate with our ethnographic experiences in Mombasa and Kutch (Mandvi) respectively. Yet all of this happens along particular lines and following certain broadly understood rules. It does not mean that intolerance, prejudice, ethnocentrism and a certain (sometimes vocal) unease *vis-à-vis* »outsiders« was altogether lacking from the scene - and indeed the ethnographic and historical literature confirms the presence of both these aspects, too. But it seems important that influential insiders can use the overarching system flexibly to push their case, in either direction. It provided pathways, loopholes and justifications to make (or declare) someone an »insider« in whom one had an interest - and thus to increase one's number of affiliates, associates and dependants within the given framework. Even though distinct and exclusive ideologies of urban social hierarchy existed on the Swahili coast (though Prins does not really go into this) and were pronounced from time to time, Prins' main point seems to be that social practice largely tended to facilitate rather than obstruct integration, not least out of the citizens' own pragmatic self-interest.

Now, if a bottom line of Prins' approach to maritime culture and ethos is that »ambivalence« and (in response) »adaptivity« are the two major and related key terms for conceiving society here, what have we gained? We seem to have arrived at a kind of conceptual grounding of how

<sup>3</sup> See Berg 1971; for a summary, see Kresse 2007: 45-50.

the »open« character of maritime towns is constituted. Rephrased again in our own terms, it seems that the littoral exposure to a multiplicity of social contacts leads to tensions and opportunities (that is, »ambiguity«) that are then taken on and dealt with in flexible and pragmatic terms (reflecting »adaptivity«) specific to the situation and the needs of the social actors involved. Based on his ethnographic experience, Prins seems convinced that the accommodating features of social flexibility, practical adjustment and making do within different scenarios of social tension characterise paradigms of behaviour in Lamu and ultimately represent core features of »maritime culture« more widely. According to him, maritime culture thus responds to situations of ambiguity and ambivalence – common on littorals, as they are brought about by a wide variety of contacts and connections to social worlds from beyond the urban community – by mediating strategies, such as bridging differences and integrating strangers. This is in contrast, as Prins implies, to more strictly interpreted and upheld norms (of Islam, for example) as to be found in other (Muslim) environments (for instance those on the Arab peninsula) that oppose »mixing« (across ethnic, linguistic and gender lines) in social interaction more strictly than the urbanites on the Swahili coast. While this seems convincing and conceptually appealing, especially for our purposes, we nevertheless wonder whether the same conclusion might not have been arrived at by intuition or simple assumption, without recourse to empirically grounded conceptual work. It does, indeed, seem almost commonsensical to say that port towns and their inhabitants anywhere in the world might appear more tolerant and open in character than landlocked and less-connected social environments because of the high degree of contact with outsiders that they have.

But could not more contact with social otherness and the tensions that this may bring about also (and just as well) lead to a greater sense of aversion and antagonism towards strangers – the opposite of openness and integration? And could it be that what Prins described as »openness« (in a good sense) is sometimes actually general »indifference« (possibly in a bad sense)? Might the regular comings and goings of different kinds of strangers lead to a greater and more profound sense of civil indifference? In such circumstances, might not crude stereotypes be called upon as a form of shorthand for pretending to understand and thus categorise difference? It is striking too that in Gujarat the maritime folk are forced together because they are not trusted; sometimes their neighbours who remain largely on the land despise them. The seafarers are denigrated, attributed low status and dressed in the clothes of bad habits. Such forms of learned indifference, stereotyping and structures of hostility are forms

of equivalence, too. With this in mind, we ask whether Prins' qualification of »maritimity«, as a constructively peaceful and mediating frame of mind, is a truism, a somewhat romanticised ideal; or is it after all ethnographically sound and able to carry us further conceptually? We will return to these questions in our conclusion.

### **Thomas Metcalf: »Imperial connections« across the Indian Ocean**

In a recent historical account of the links between colonial India and East Africa, Thomas Metcalf (2007) suggests that India was at the centre of the British Empire, in a more pronounced sense than scholarship has thus far acknowledged. The existence of the Raj in India made possible and provided a continuous logistical base and support for British conquest, control and governance in East Africa (and in other parts of Asia) – not least through the formation of Indian armies. Thus, from the perspective of the British Empire, colonial India was the place from which people, ideas, goods and institutions radiated outwards, particularly from Calcutta, Madras and, most interestingly for our purposes, Bombay. Metcalf suggests that an India-centred imperial web defined the Indian Ocean of the nineteenth century – the »British lake«. India was not just a colony among others, but the centre of the Empire and a testing ground for imperial techniques. Thus, for example, during the nineteenth century, the experience, inspiration and precedents of law and administration developed in India were exported almost wholesale to East Africa. Perhaps the most poignant example of the influence of »Greater India« is that the gauge on the railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria was selected to match Indian standards rather than those in use in Sudan or South Africa.

Of course, Indians had commercial settlements along the coasts of eastern and southern Africa long before the arrival of British imperialism. However, during the nineteenth century the growth of Indian commerce in East Africa coincided with the expansion of the Omani Empire, marked most forcibly by the relocation of the Muscat sultanate from Oman to Zanzibar by Sultan Said in 1840, and the expansion of the British colonial interest in the region. The merchants involved were mostly from Kutch and Kathiawad (regions today encompassed by the state of Gujarat), and they moved, often with great success, into trade, moneylending and customs collection in the ports of East Africa. These transient mercantile communities formed the basis for subsequent and more permanent settlements of Indians in Africa later on.

During the early decades of British colonialism, Metcalf argues, East Africa became almost an extension of India itself, as the land was promoted with the slogan »an America for the Hindu«. In the late nineteenth century, the colonial government

actively encouraged Indians to settle in East Africa, convinced that their industriousness would enhance the conditions of the country and that the climate would be suitable to their physiology. According to colonial administrative logic, »the Indian« could be a teacher to »the African« and initiate a salutary process of supposed »racial improvement« within a clearly framed tripartite hierarchy of races that would itself be transferred to British colonial Africa.

These ways of thinking about the categorisation and ordering of India's people also found expression in the new colonies in Africa. As officials struggling to understand what they saw in these little-known environments, they drew on their experiences of learning to see in India as well as on administrative precedents in the more abstract sense. It has been well documented on both sides of the Indian Ocean how colonial policies shaped new realities of local societies as »castes«, and »tribes« were reified and the hierarchical relations between people were codified in new ways (for India see Dirks 2001; for Africa see Vail 1989, Lentz 1995). However, the classification of people was determined not just by the census and gazetteer approach to dividing and cataloguing populations, for the imperial project also inscribed a racial hierarchy in the Indian Ocean in which the Indian was »in the middle« with Europeans »above« and Africans »below« (this was visible in British East Africa as much as later in apartheid South Africa). As an integral part of the colonial expansion, Metcalf suggests, Indians came to imagine themselves as »imperial citizens« away from home, when travelling overseas, as they also came face to face with an emerging sense of their »nationality« in various ways.

While there are clearly historical antecedents to the conceptualisation of racial hierarchy in the Indian Ocean, the experience of race and identity in the colonial era led into pre- and post-colonial nationalist movements and relations between Indian and African subjects in the Indian Ocean arena: crudely put, Indians in Africa became pariahs to the Africans, and as pariahs looked down upon the Africans surrounding them. In a sense, new forms of racial society were formed in the Indian Ocean that had very particular consequences. National or continental identity became suffused with essentialised notions of identity, and Indians remain Indians in East Africa despite centuries of settlement.

In some ways, it is tempting to apply Metcalf's argument about the creation of the Indian Ocean region through the colonial categories of India to the academic writing on the colonial Indian Ocean, where the most hegemonic of sources have been those of British Imperialism and the artefacts of that enterprise continue to be used to represent history. However, a number of limitations to both

Metcalf's approach and his material are worth considering. First, it is almost obvious that, if one reads the English-language records of imperial correspondence that radiated from Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, then the visible world is going to take the form of that correspondence. Other connections, languages and materials are necessarily written out, and the effect is to read the Empire as it imagined and structured itself through writing, not as it actually was. Here, in a sense, the Empire made itself through writing, as the writing made the Empire, but here Metcalf does not touch upon the important tangle of this relationship.

Second, Chaudhuri and others have enraged the historians of Africa by writing history for Africa through the lives and works of colonials and Indians without recourse to Africans – and the same charge could be levelled at Metcalf's work: Africans are largely invisible, other than as slaves and as manifestations of European colonial prejudices. Africa too appears largely without consequence in the formation of the techniques of those who ruled it. By looking at Africa from Bombay, we also miss movements along the coast of Africa and interactions among Africans. India and its inhabitants are also homogenised, as differences among Indians in terms of caste, religion and politics are glossed over; significant differences within India – differences in law and administrative structure between the presidencies for example – are collapsed into a homogenising narrative of colonial India as one. In this sense, Metcalf's book illustrates how an Asia-centred approach that addresses and rebalances a standard vision of Europe as a normative role model or measure may itself lose sight not only of other (here African) agents involved, but also oversimplify and conflate aspects of Indian history.

If however, as we have suggested, we treat Metcalf's work as representing a sample of the knowledge practices of Empire, then we can also see that, at least as far as India was concerned, Africans in Africa were in fact regarded as largely irrelevant, noncitizens, people without rights and duties. Colonial epistemology created a hierarchy of races and citizens and the Indians shared in this wisdom.

Celebratory Gujarati literature from the early twentieth century on the Indian colonisation of East Africa describes the pioneers as masters and kings of the land, and Africans are generally painted in tones equally as derisive as in colonial discourses (see Sampat 1940 as a representative instance).

From Metcalf, then, we take the idea that notions of race and caste in the colonial Indian Ocean may have had Indian precedents; but when such modes of categorisation came into play elsewhere, in East Africa for example, they also encountered other modes of identity articulation. Although administrative practice from India may have survived



more or less intact in the offices of Empire, on the ground other regimes of distinction continued to operate and produced new forms of identity and inter-ethnic modes of classification.

### **Helene Basu: narratives of mission and origin creating »home« as »other«**

The German anthropologist Helene Basu speaks about the challenge of a certain »methodological dilemma« for anthropologists working in the Indian Ocean region, caused by the trans-regional nature of the object and range of inquiry (2007: 291). Discussing drumming and praying as ritual healing and religious mediation practices within the Siddi community across time and space in relation to African healing cults, Basu expresses regret that the disciplinary and conceptual toolbox that researchers have at their disposal to conduct analysis is often limited to clear-cut »regional« paradigms, such as »South Asia« and »East Africa«. This is not helpful for the process of understanding what is going on or how things are related. In fact, it often obstructs researchers from coming to grips with complex social realities. Clear-cut »regionally« defined boxes of analysis are inappropriate because the local people to be represented in the ethnography often draw on (potentially faraway) conceptions and histories outside and beyond those kinds of boxes – as Basu shows the Siddis do.

Helene Basu is one of a few contemporary anthropologists with long-term fieldwork and research experience with a community that is fundamentally trans-oceanic, in terms of origin and self-presentation: the so-called Siddis on the Gujarat coast (Basu 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008). Situated historically between East Africa and western India, group members clearly position their home within contemporary South Asia – in contrast to many other diasporic groups. Their ancestors are said to have migrated from eastern Africa to Gujarat through different channels: as soldiers (from old Ethiopia or Abyssinia) who participated in the fourteenth-century Turkish-Ottoman military conquests of Gujarat and Cambay via Persia;<sup>4</sup> as slaves (from East and Central Africa) who came to India through the trade market hub of Zanzibar during the nineteenth century; and also as sailors or other travellers. According to Basu, slavery does not feature in Siddi historical narratives and ritual commemorations of their origins. The focus is squarely on a legendary rescue mission launched by three saintly ancestral figures, cast as siblings who represent African Muslims from different parts of the continent, who come to Gujarat to liberate their Muslim peers from evil forces in the shape of a demoness troubling the region.

Their self-understanding and ritual practice in the contemporary setting, as well as their low but acknowledged status in South Asian society within a recognised social niche understood in terms of »caste«, all relate back to this narrative. As Basu explains, the narrative, as well as the performative processes of Siddi self-representation and social engagement (as fakirs, jesters, and guardians of shrines), picks up on »ambivalence« as a main feature of historical background and social experience. Through processes of »inversion«, various aspects and facets of ambivalence are then transformed into positive identity markers, resulting in the close association or identification with heroes, saints and healers.

In this section, we recount Basu's general characterisation of the Siddis and summarise her main arguments about the role that narrative memory and ritual practice play for their self-positioning in society, or their social niche in the contemporary South Asian world in which they are embedded – even if under conditions of ambivalence and sometimes perception as socially »other« potentially associated with »elsewhere«. The presentation, location and justification of the Siddi self within the strongly hierarchical framework of South Asian society is to be understood within this framework of rules, idioms and terminologies. How Siddis make reference to »Africa«, whether explicitly or implicitly, is not a given, nor can any lines of argument be anticipated without close attention to ethnographic detail itself.

Basu's thoroughly worked out ethnography presents a particularly well-grounded and well-contextualized case *vis-à-vis* the recent trend of light research to present versions of »Africa in India« and »Indians in Africa« and vice-versa (see for example Jayasuriya and Angenot 2008; Hawley 2008). Basu cautions against a free and uncritical use of »diaspora« as an analytic concept – as this is often not appropriate for the way that migrant communities across the Indian Ocean live, how they see themselves and how they conduct their daily lives among others in littoral societies elsewhere. Here, we characterise the main features of her account and think about what it can offer (in terms of inspiration, possibilities and constraints) for our project of thinking through »equivalence« between African and Indian littorals, both ethnographically and theoretically.

The Siddis in Gujarat are socially organised around the shrines of three Sufi saints of African origin. These are one woman and two men who are said to have been siblings. The location of the *dargah* (shrine) of all three is mostly referred to by the name of the eldest brother, Bava Gor (properly Siddi Mubarak Nobi), who has been known to local historians as a holy Abyssinian man since at least the sixteenth century (Basu 2008: 229). His younger brother is called Bava Habash and the

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Misra (1964: 13–14).

youngest sister Mai Mishra. According to Siddi legend, they came to Gujarat to rid the Gujarati towns of the danger of a Hindu demoness threatening to kill their populations. Bava Gor, the eldest, led an army overland from Mecca while Bava Habash took dhows from near Abyssinia to support his brother. Mai Mishra with her group came by dhow as well. Notably, it was the young sister Mai Mishra who – as the female force needed to match the female threat – ultimately succeeded in overcoming the demoness after the brothers were stuck in a critical standoff situation with her.

The three legendary siblings represent Africa as historical background and legendary homeland to the Siddis: Bava Gor, also called Nobi, stands for the Nubian (wider Sudanic) heritage, Bava Habash for Abyssinia (old Ethiopia) and Mai Mishra for Egypt (Misri). The Siddi community identifies them as the highest-ranking Sufi (Muslim) saints and at the same time also as their ultimate African ancestral spirits (2008: 231). Thus we see a convergence of religious status, descent, ritual expertise and healing power indicated in the saintly African *pirs*. This is paralleled on a communal level, with the descendants shaping a loosely endogamous community within which the properties of *karamat* (special powers) are believed to be passed on. In particular, these powers are exercised through spirit possession and related healing techniques enacted in ritual settings, including drumming and invocational praying (*dua*) along the lines of the *ngoma* healing cults of Central and South-Eastern Africa (see Janzen 1992). Basu goes as far as to say that, through the Siddi groups, »African spirituality as embedded in *ngoma* cults of affliction has been reconstructed by Indian Ocean travellers far beyond the shores of Africa« (2007: 318).

At this point, however, we wonder how justifiable this assertion of a historical »reconstruction« can be. Without dropping the important point that Basu is making, perhaps this statement about trans-oceanic equivalence need not be cast in such bold and presumptive terms – keeping in mind that a historical reconstruction here seems as far out of reach as reliable information about the status of *ngoma* cults in Africa during the historical period in question. It may be sufficient to speak of »family resemblances« that provide traces or indications of historical influences and commonalities. We find stimulating the points that Basu presents so carefully throughout her work about structural influences and appropriations from an African past upon South Asian social actors today, when thinking about trans-oceanic »equivalence«: how are the (seemingly) »same« ritual and healing practices employed, justified, called and performed in a social context in which the linguistic, cultural and religious paradigms follow somewhat different criteria and have different histories?

Socially, the Siddi groups have arranged themselves as *fakirs* and other kinds of ritual healing experts, shrine caretakers and mediators between common visitors and the *pirs* (saints), and so they see themselves following in the footsteps of their sacred ancestors. The pathway of this (African-inspired) kind of Indian Sufism with its vivacious and ecstatic practices, however, as Basu makes clear, is in marked contrast to most other forms of Sufism, e.g. those that highlight literacy, bodily restraint and piety (often associated with higher social status).

As this cannot be a comprehensive overview, let us turn to some of the instances of »inversion« that are at work here in the Siddi narrative of self-presentation and self-affirmation that picks up on (and has to position itself *vis-à-vis*) the historical and social experience of »ambivalence« – both of which Basu discusses explicitly. The dark skin and frizzy hair by which Siddi are easily identified, and identify themselves, within wider Gujarati society, are taken by Siddis as indicators of blessings and magical powers taken over from the saintly ancestors. This is in distinct contrast to Gujarati standards of beauty and the representation of sincerity, which seems pejoratively biased against »black« people (the reasons for which we partially touched upon in the section on Thomas Metcalf).

Slavery, a historical fact and burden for the Siddi community, is absent from the legendary founding narrative as conveyed to us here. The whole story, which is central to social identification as »Siddi«, appears as a narrative of heroism in which the main characters from Africa are cast as Muslim role models who become saints. Here, Islamic idioms of decency, proper behaviour and morality are integrated as well. Also, the historical experience of slavery and the powerlessness of individuals as objects who are acted upon, traded, owned and determined by others, is inversely transformed. The extremely strong and superseding ritual power ascribed to the saints and, by association, to Siddi experts comes to them through possession rituals and patterns carrying an »African« tinge. Along with performative aspects of drumming and dancing there is a particular point about gender (and female empowerment) involved, as here it is markedly women who are possessed and active as healers – in contrast to how possession is commonly found in South Asia. In India, the Siddis are perceived by others and themselves as jokers and jesters within their social environment, representing aspects of fun, enjoyment, wit and the playful performance of sociality. These seem to be particular features or social markers of Siddis, in stark contrast (as mentioned above) to many other Sufis who emphasise restraint, silence, bodily composure and asceticism as forms of piety.

What comes across in Basu's account is that Siddis are, and should be seen as, Indians with a his-

tory from elsewhere (Africa) – yet casting them as »Africans« in India is unhelpful and makes only limited sense in the light of their own endeavours. It also neglects the long-term historical processes of social assimilation of incoming groups over (many) generations. As Basu says (and as we have seen here), »in Gujarat, Africans were assimilated into the local society in terms of indigenous categories of hierarchy, caste (*jamat*) and religion (as Muslim *fakirs*)« (2007: 297). They found their niche and developed their position within the existing (and somewhat flexible) social system. In the same context, with a view to contemporary politics, Basu highlights that Siddhis in Gujarat today are struggling for rights equal to those of people who are already recognised as »original inhabitants« (*Adivasi*). In terms of political recognition and their self-understanding as Indians in contemporary India, they seem to have little interest in and no benefit from using explicit reference to »Africa« (2007: 298).

### David Pocock: re-thinking caste in Gujarat through an East African lens

David Pocock was a student of Evans-Pritchard, the renowned Oxford anthropologist of eastern Africa, in the 1950s. Pocock was best known for his work in South Asia, and he remains noted today largely because of his work with the French anthropologist Louis Dumont and the journal they founded in the 1950s, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1970s, Pocock published two influential monographs on Gujarat, *Kanbi and Patidar* (1972) and *Mind, body and wealth* (1973). These were firmly rooted in the language and provincial frames of Indian sociology, although, as we shall see their content was deeply influenced by his previous work in Africa. In this section, we look at the intellectual influences that shaped his early conceptions of anthropology and the consequence of these for his passage from East Africa to India. Pocock's treatment of the equivalences and differences he saw between the continents is intellectually stimulating because, although his first work was in Africa and this clearly influenced the way he saw India, he subsequently looked back to Africa from India, holding Gujarat to represent the authentic cultural yardstick against which social organisation among Indians in Africa could be measured.

Pocock's early fieldwork was part of a research initiative sponsored by the British government in the nervous post-war years. He conducted post-doctoral research in East Africa in 1951, staying for at least four months in Chikundi in the Southern Province of Tanganyika; he clearly also

spent time in Zanzibar and Dar-es-Salaam, but this is less well documented. Little of this research was published at the time; some appeared later, framed by subsequent research conducted in Central Gujarat. As Pocock himself recalled, »My field-work started in East Africa before I had had experience of the fully articulated caste system. It was an initial and naive attempt to establish some sort of ranking as I supposed should exist that revealed the variety and contradictory nature of these characterizations [of caste hierarchy]« (1957a: 296, fn. 13).

It seems the experience of Indians in East Africa, however naive he thought it was, had consequences for the way Pocock saw India. This way of seeing distinguished him from his contemporaries and left a somewhat irregular imprint on his work. Pocock assumed, and fieldwork confirmed to him, that the social organisation of Indians in East Africa had not simply accompanied migrants unaltered across the Indian Ocean. Comparing Bouglé's model of the caste system, based on hierarchical organisation, hereditary specialisation and reciprocal repulsion, with what he saw in East Africa, Pocock (1957a) concluded that the first two conditions were not fulfilled and therefore there was no caste to speak of in Africa: there were »castes« but no »caste system«.

There was no hierarchical organisation because the main castes in East Africa, which he identified as Bhatias, Lohanas, Banias and Patidars, were all part of different local hierarchies in »greater Gujarat« (1957a: 291).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, they could not be ranked in relation to one another because the position of different castes in different hierarchies was not interchangeable, being relative only to the particular Brahmin caste within that local hierarchy. Although all four castes were engaged in trade in East Africa, Pocock did not see this as a form of Bouglé's hereditary specialisation in »the most rigorous sense of the word« or as a »specialization as a specialization is usually understood in the context of an Indian village« (1957a: 292), and therefore he discounted it. If however, we take Pocock's observations at face value, then contrary to the recent work of some economic historians (for example, Markovits 2000) one could argue that it was caste, rather than traditional systems of agrarian or commercial inter-caste relationships that facilitated the movement of people from Gujarat to East Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Gujarat came into existence as a modern political entity in 1960. Pocock's term »greater Gujarat« in 1957 refers to the Gujarati-speaking parts of western India. This was also the name given to the region by those campaigning for a separate linguistic state »Gujarat« to be carved from the then much larger Bombay State. In the campaign for a separate Gujarat, »greater Gujarat« was also the term used to describe all regions where Gujarati was spoken, and this often explicitly included East Africa (see also Simpson 2011).

<sup>5</sup> What we think of as »social anthropology« is largely thought of as »Indian sociology« in India.

On the third condition, however, Bouglé's »reciprocal repulsion«, Pocock had more to say. For Bouglé, repulsion was structurally reflected throughout the caste system so that »[i]n the eyes of the orthodox Hindu, every caste other than his own, whatever that may be, is in a sense impure« (Pocock 1957a: 293). Pocock asked: in what sense could an inferior caste regard a superior caste as impure? To explain this seeming paradox, he argued that the all-embracing caste system attributed to all men a social category and moral qualities that are conceived of as a system of immutable differences. However, to understand the logic of this system, it was necessary to distinguish between the quality attributed and its ethical or religious connotations in particular contexts. It was Bouglé's failure to distinguish these two aspects of the one phenomenon that created a false problem. Pocock gave the following example: a caste may eat meat because it is in the habit of doing so, but in a Brahmanical hierarchal society this habit is low (1957a: 295). He reasoned that these two statements were the two aspects (the first a generic difference and the second a judgement of morality) of the same phenomenon, which he called the »psychology of hierarchy«.

According to Pocock, although the »psychology of hierarchy« remained to some extent, in East Africa caste had become freed from its traditional and orthodox religious framework, in part due to the different regional origins of the castes (from different parts of Gujarat). In Africa, castes took cognizance of each other in terms of »difference«, as the ability to judge morally within a coherent framework had diminished. He commented dismissively on those working in East Africa who thought they were dealing with »caste« (1957b: 305). Some time later, he remarked that the Indians of East Africa were »a people whose reference group is still to a large extent abroad and whose social forms are, often explicitly, temporary adjustments to their current but endemically alien scene« (Pocock 1969: 633). Instead of the hierarchical system of castes he had read so much about in Oxford, he was drawn to consider individual castes in East Africa on their own terms, pursuing the idea that »there is that in a caste which makes it what it is and not otherwise« (1957a: 293).<sup>7</sup>

By the time Pocock began to publish his work on Indians in Africa, he had already conducted a significant period of research in Gujarat. In Guja-

rat, Pocock settled on the village of Sundarana in Charotar of Kaira District, conducting subsidiary work in the neighbouring villages of Dharmaj and Goel. Between 1953 and 1956, he spent a total of 18 months in India in what was then a part of Bombay State.

This fieldwork allowed him to interpret what he had seen in Africa through the lens of the Gujarat material, regarding village India to be the closest to the »traditional« or »orthodox« version of caste Hinduism, and urban India and Africa respectively as representing the progressive degradation of caste as a system. This perhaps explains in part why he explicitly used the Gujarat material to comment on the African case, rather than the other way around as one might expect, given that it is commonly reported that anthropologists see aspects of their first field sites in places they chose to later work. In a sense, the Gujarat material became the mark of normalcy against which the African case differed.

However, his experience in East Africa clearly also had implications for the way he saw India, as his writing on Gujarat continued to develop the »difference« thesis, which clearly had African roots in his mind, and gave his work a character quite different from other Indian Sociology being written at the time. The Hindu castes he became familiar with in Africa, notably the Lohanas, Bhatias, Baniyas and Patidars, were castes with quite a distinct and arguably atypical form. In the 1950s, each had a strong corporate identity, exclusive communal institutions and internal codes for self-regulation. Each had prospered, initially during the colonial period, settling in the ports of the Indian Ocean, notably Bombay. Historically, each too was associated with particular forms of religious organisation, and a particular specialist priesthood whose role often complimented the secular functions of the caste organisation. In a sense, these castes were of a distinct mercantile type that had developed in the colonial Indian Ocean both in India and East Africa.

Although Pocock's analysis of caste and difference in East Africa remains one of the most astute, it is distorted by his devotion to the measure of cultural authenticity, a quality he actually seemed to think was reflected in Bouglé's analysis of the caste system more than it was in rural Gujarat. Moreover, it seems to us that his »difference« thesis was in fact remarkably thin, because the forms these castes took were actually similar in India to how they appeared to Pocock in East Africa because at that time they were transnational organisations rather than simply castes embedded in local hierarchies. And although Pocock never succeeded in connecting his »Indian Indians« with the »African Indians« in his written work, this probably became apparent to him as well, because much of his later writing was aimed at describing »difference«

<sup>7</sup> His view of caste in Africa was not entirely consistent, because elsewhere, at about the same time, perhaps prompted by intellectual rivalry as much by truth, he wrote that economic and commercial relationships overrode the importance of caste (however conceived) as a principle of loyalty or faction among the Indians in Africa (1957b: 305). In this paper at least, caste had ceased to matter as an organising principle in East Africa.



in India, or »that in a caste which makes it what it is and not otherwise«, rather than relations between castes.

## Conclusion

We have seen that »maritime class« plays a distinct role in the construction of different kinds of trans-oceanic axes. From the late-colonial period onwards, there was a sustained interest in the mercantile castes of India in Africa. In the records of the Bombay Presidency, for example, the Indian merchants of East Africa posed particular »problems« for the colonial administration: who had jurisdiction over them? What nationality were they? Who could legitimately extract taxes from them? What was their role in the East African slave trade? Who had the right to punish them? In seeking answers to these most administrative of questions, the colonial government conducted investigations and carried out extensive survey work in Zanzibar and along the east coast of Africa. Arguably, through these exercises, and rather as Metcalf suggests more generally, the colonial government saw Africa through the lens of the administrative categories and practices of India: the fact that for a large part of the nineteenth century much of East Africa was governed by the British from Bombay rather confirms the theory. In this sense, the units of administration adopted by the colonial government had demonstrable consequences for the way knowledge was created and stored: much archival material for colonial Zanzibar is still housed in Bombay, for instance.

In the process of learning how to govern the »Indians« in East Africa, the practices of what Dirks (2001) calls the »ethnographic state« – the census and the gazetteers and here the survey – contributed to the making and fame of a series of elite Indian maritime communities: Muslim Khojas (Ismailis and Ithanasharis), Memons and Vohras, and the Hindu Bhatias, Lohanas, Banias and Patidars. These communities were identified, named and became objects of governance. In turn, they responded to being treated as such, developing internal legal codes and standardised ways of presenting themselves through journals and caste publications. In this sense, and as Pocock's analysis of these communities reveals when read against the meaning he attempted to impose on it, the classificatory procedures of the colonial government were not neutral in effect and contributed to the making of Indian communities in East Africa. The classificatory schemes the colonial government used to divide people and to designate significance to particular kinds of community also lives on in the post-colonial era. Thus Pocock's »Indian« communities of the 1950s were also those on which a substantial body of literature had slowly developed since the British started to take an interest in Zanzibari society. They were not of

course the only Indians in East Africa, but they were the most visible, accessible and, importantly, they could be read about.

With the exception of Basu's work, we are unaware of any substantial comparative scholarship on the less visible (although sometimes conspicuous) classes of sailors and labourers in the Indian Ocean region (though see Sheriff 2010: 53-63). Here we have in mind those who traditionally built and crewed the thousands of mercantile dhow boats, more so than those who worked as oilmen on steamers (e.g. Ahuja 2002: 39-60). It strikes us that, if anywhere, it is perhaps at this level that the historically contingent yet somewhat elusive cosmopolitan figure may be found around whom much Indian Ocean scholarship has been discretely arranged – no less than among elite and endogamous merchants based in multiple ports. An Indian Ocean cosmopolitan of this kind, at home between and across both littorals and continents, was likely to be the one who was less concerned with caste purity, whose religious practices were not tied to a particular temple or priestly caste, and who would appeal to universal justice rather than a sectarian committee.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps we could say that, at another level, such a cosmopolitan figure has internalized both sides of equivalence and thus is able (*privileged as well as condemned*) to embody and live through it – which leads us back to the experience of »ambivalence«, to be explored further elsewhere. Little, as yet, has been recovered in research of such men on whose work the merchant princes of the ports on the Ocean littorals built their wealth and grew famous.

We have seen that Metcalf articulates the distorting power of colonialism and draws attention to the directions of colonial visions and epistemologies in the Indian Ocean, how they are transmitted and employed even and especially between different kinds of colonial subjects in (and from) diverse locations. He reminds us that the history of relations between the subjects of our own research has a pronounced and very concrete imperial tinge, whereby visions and imaginations of these subjects are themselves entangled within (standard and adopted) narratives of Empire and expressed with reference to them. Beyond this, it is interesting to see that Metcalf himself – as a self-proclaimed indocentric researcher – has little to say on the perspectives of African people and hardly consults any sources that would make such an inclusion possible. Does he relegate them to the sidelines and footnotes of Indian history in Africa, which perhaps for him is Indian Ocean history?

In another direction, Pocock again teaches us to be wary of searching for the authentic in the act of comparison and cautions us of the dangers of

<sup>8</sup> See Salvadori 1989 and 1996, for related illustrations.

looking at distant shores through the wrong end of the telescope. »Caste«, we can see, is not always like »caste« elsewhere, as it takes different forms in different locations. Caste is conceived and lived differently on different littorals, in that relational projections in the construction of social hierarchies refer to different reference points even when using the same terminologies in the same language. Or, one could say, the »same« reference points when employed elsewhere, in a different social environment, have become somewhat different. Indeed, Pocock also reconfirms to us that it is possible to learn more about social phenomena when they have become less visible and poignant in social life.

Basu encourages us to look outside the conventional sociological and geographic frames of reference, as she derives her wider conceptual terms of analysis, »ambivalence« and »inversion«, from attention to the specific narratives, ritual performances and forms of common social conduct of the Siddis. These terms indeed seem to offer good potential for a wider use when conceptualizing axes of social relationships, as well as similarity and difference across the ocean, and might have to be tested and scrutinised further in this respect. The fact that »ambivalence«, similarly derived from ethnographic observations in Lamu, plays an important role too for Prins' general characterization of »maritime culture« may be an indicator of conceptual trans-oceanic mileage here. According to his account of Lamu as a paradigmatic example, »ambivalence« is responded to and mediated by forces and dynamics of »adaptivity«. This illustrates another possible dimension of a flexible response to »ambivalence«, alternative to yet in logical concurrence with »inversion« as highlighted by Basu.

In conclusion, this gives rise to a horizon for a whole new circle of arguments and discussions. Not only do these features stand out and provide food for more thinking across the ocean, the features of »ambivalence« and its responses of »adaptivity« or »inversion«. Hereby, »adaptivity« qualifies *people living by the sea* in general, as Prins illustrates; and »inversion« qualifies the response by an *underprivileged diasporic group from across the ocean* in its acquired social environment, as Basu worked out. But also, the ways reference to »caste« or caste-like categories come explicitly into play when thinking across the ocean provides a pathway to reflectively employ Pocock's critical notion of »caste« and its transformation outside of India both on African littorals and indeed at home, when it is brought back to India from elsewhere. All of these notions, we think, have illustrated not only an analytical value in terms of our capacity to think fruitfully about society across the ocean. They all are themselves also the outcome of reflection upon sustained long-term ethnographic work

on different aspects of how social groups are connected across the ocean, in real or potential terms. Whether this happens through the vivid imagination of mythical origin from an elsewhere that is no longer longed for as actual place of belonging (as with the Siddis according to Basu), or through the focus on the reality of social contact with people from elsewhere at home, and on the wider social potential of this by integrating others or going abroad (as with maritime people according to Prins), the two ways provide different patterns of reacting to states of »being connected« – having moved in the one case, being able to move in the other – and shaping a social group accordingly.

In relation to »caste«, Pocock shows us how such concepts themselves might be shaped and transformed by movement, even if such change was unintentional. Yet, of course, many other notions of social connections at linguistic, material, visual, oral or other sensual or conceptual levels could easily be seen as potentially affected by the same kind of dynamics. And this is why we think and hope to have shown here that reference to »equivalence« might prove helpful when thinking these things through.

Finally, we hope to have drawn attention to the ways the itineraries and the ethos of academic journeys in the Indian Ocean region influence how things, people and social lives come to be known and to the ways this knowledge is in turn presented. As we have seen, this often reflects quite clearly the academic's own assumptions about equivalence across the ocean, making comparison both possible and perilous.

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